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SKY

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EXCERPT

STARS

SYSTEM DIVINE BOOK I

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A SCI-FI
REIMAGINING
★★★★★ OF ★★★★
LES MISÉRABLES

- PART 1 -

ASCENSION

The System Divine offered hope. Hope to the inhabitants of a dying world. With its three beautiful Sols and twelve habitable planets, the miraculous system would become a new home. A new start. A place where twelve powerful families could begin again. The Paresse family was one of those families and Laterre was their new planet.

High on a hill, the family built their Grand Palais under a vast climate-controlled dome. And in the flatlands below lived their chosen people. The magnificent ships that had once carried these workers across the galaxies became their homes.

They were the lucky ones.

At first.

From *The Chronicles of the Sisterhood*,
Volume 1, Chapter 3

- C H A P T E R 1 -

CHATINE

THE RAIN WAS FALLING SIDEWAYS IN THE MARSH. It was never a straight downpour. It was always crooked. Just like the people here. Con artists and hustlers and crocs, the lot of them.

Anyone can be a saint until they're hungry enough.

Chatine Renard was perched high above it all, watching the stream of people churn through the busy marketplace like clotted blood through a vein. She was straddling an exposed metal beam that once connected the old freightship to its roof.

At least, that's what Chatine had been told—that the Frets were once titanic flying vessels that soared across the galaxy, bringing her ancestors to the planet of Laterre, the coldest and wettest of the twelve planets in the System Divine. But years of neglect and crooked rain had corroded the PermaSteel walls and ceilings, turning the staterooms in the passenger freightships into leaky, mold-ridden housing for the poor, and this cargo freightship into an open-air marketplace.

Chatine pulled her hood farther down her forehead in an attempt to block her face. Much to her dismay, she'd noticed over the past

few years that her eyelashes had grown longer, her chest had filled out, her cheekbones had become more pronounced, and her nose had slimmed to a dainty point, which she despised.

She had streaked her face with mud before coming to the Marsh today, but every time she caught sight of her reflection in a puddle or the metal of a partially collapsed wall, she cringed at how much she still looked like a girl.

So inconvenient.

The Marsh was far more crowded today than usual. Chatine leaned forward and balanced on her stomach, hugging the beam to her chest as she scanned the countless faces that passed beneath her. They were always the same faces. Poor, downtrodden souls like her trying to find creative ways to stretch their weekly wages.

Or con their neighbor out of a larg or two.

Newcomers were rare to the Marsh. No one outside of the Third Estate bothered with the picked-over cabbages and mangy turnips for sale. With the exception of Inspecteur Limier and his army of Policier droids tasked with keeping the peace, the Frets and the marketplace in its center were normally avoided at all costs by anyone who didn't live here.

Which was why the man in the long coat immediately caught Chatine's eye. His wealth was written all over his groomed black beard, matching hair, pressed clothes, and sparkling adornments.

Second Estate, to be sure.

She'd never known the First Estate to ever venture out of Ledôme. The climate-controlled biodome sat high on the hill on the outskirts of the capital city of Vallonay, shielding the First Estate from Laterre's persistent downpours.

And the slums below.

Chatine's eyes raked over the man, taking in every stitch and every button. Her gaze expertly landed on the gold medallion dangling like bait from his neck. She didn't have to see it up close to know it

was a relic from the Last Days, rescued from the burning embers of a dying planet. The Second Estate loved their First World relics.

Five hundred largs easy, Chatine calculated in her head. Enough money to feed an entire Third Estate family for weeks.

But it wouldn't be long before the rest of the crocs in the Marsh spotted the treasure too and made their play. Which meant Chatine had to move fast.

Gripping the beam with both hands, she swung her legs over the side and launched her body to the nearby catwalk, landing silently in a crouch. Directly underneath her, the man continued farther into the marketplace, weaving around the loose chickens that roamed the stalls searching for scraps. His gaze swept left and right as though he was taking mental inventory of the space.

For a moment, Chatine wondered what he was doing here. Had he gotten lost on his way back up to Ledôme? Or was he here on some kind of business? But then she remembered the annual Ascension happening later today and reasoned he was probably a foreman of a fabrique, come to round up his workers who were skipping out on their shifts to get jacked up on weed wine, all the while hoping to win a new life.

“Win a new life?” Chatine muttered to herself, and let out a bitter laugh.

Deluded fools, all of them.

She crept across the grid of overhead walkways and ramps, skillfully ducking to avoid broken water pipes and leaping over giant chasms in the grated floor. All the while, she kept a close watch on the man, making sure she was never more than a few steps behind him.

He finally slowed near Madame Dufour’s stall, pulled an apricot from his pocket, and took a large bite, the juice dripping into his beard. Chatine’s mouth started to water. She’d only ever tasted an apricot once, when a crate had fallen off the back of a cargo transpor-teur delivering fruit from the hothouses to Ledôme.

Chatine watched Madame Dufour size the man up with sinister fascination. The old croc was practically licking her lips at the sight of such an easy mark.

It was now or never.

Ducking under the broken railing, Chatine grabbed onto the raised rim of the walkway floor and somersaulted over the edge. She whipped her body forward, fell three mètres down, and adeptly caught the beam below her. She circled around until it rested against her hips and she could balance there.

She was now only a mètre above the man's head. Yet with the buzz of the busy marketplace, no one even bothered to look up.

“What a pitiful sight,” the man said, taking another bite of his apricot. He didn’t even bother to hide his disgust. The Second Estate rarely did. It was something about being stuck in the middle, Chatine had always noticed—not quite rulers and yet far from being one of the wretched like her—that gave the Second Estate their shameless sense of arrogance.

They were almost more intolerable than the First Estate.

Almost.

Chatine’s gaze cut to the left, taking in the tower of empty crates stacked up next to Madame Dufour’s stall. She shimmied along the beam until she was directly above them. Then, she tipped forward, rotated around, and kicked both feet out in front of her.

The crash was louder than she anticipated. The crates toppled to the ground, avalanching around the man as he fell to his knees with a grunt.

Chatine moved quickly. She landed in a squat, then crawled through the wreckage until she found the man and graciously helped him back onto his feet. He was so busy brushing dust and cabbage leaves from his coat, he didn’t even feel the medallion being lifted from his neck.

“Are you all right, monsieur?” Chatine asked in her friendliest tone, slipping the pendant into her pocket.

The man barely looked at her as he straightened his hat. “Quite all right, boy.”

“You must be careful in the Marsh, monsieur. It isn’t safe for someone of your rank.”

“Merci,” he said dismissively as he tossed the apricot he’d been eating toward Chatine.

She caught it and flashed him an appreciative smile. “Vive Laterre.”

“Vive Laterre,” he echoed before turning away.

Chatine grinned at the man’s back as she turned on her heel and slipped the half-eaten apricot into her pocket. It took all her strength not to consume the entire thing here and now.

She knew the man would hardly even miss that gold medallion from his neck. He probably had ten just like it back in his manoir in Ledôme. But to her, it was everything.

It would *change* everything.

The wind picked up, howling through the stalls and biting viciously at Chatine’s skin. She pulled her tattered black coat tighter around her, trying in vain to stave off the chill. But the holes and ripped lining of her clothes weren’t the problem. It was the hunger—the ribs poking through her skin. There wasn’t a single shred of insulation left on her body.

But after that score, she was finding it hard to care.

As Chatine headed toward the south exit of the Marsh, weaving through stalls selling moldy potatoes, slimy leeks, and pungent seaweed dragged in from the nearby docks, there was a new lightness to her gait. A new hopefulness in her step.

But just before passing through what used to be the old cargo ship’s loading bay, Chatine felt a large hand clamp down on her shoulder and she stopped dead in her tracks, a shiver running through her.

“So nice of you to help out a member of the Second Estate,” a cold, robotic voice said. “I’ve never seen such chivalry from a *Renard*.”

The emphasis he placed on her last name made Chatine squirm.

She closed her eyes, mustering strength, and painted on a blithe smile before slowly turning around.

“Inspecteur Limier,” she said. “Always a pleasure.”

His stony expression didn’t change. It hardly ever did. The circuitry implants on the left side of his face made it nearly impossible for the inspecteur to express any emotion. Chatine often wondered if the man was even *capable* of smiling.

“I wish I could say the same for you, Théo.” His tone was flat.

Only her parents called her Chatine. Everyone in the Frets knew her as Théo. It was the name she’d given herself ten years ago, when they’d first moved to the capital city of Vallonay and Chatine had decided that life as a boy would be much less complicated than life as a girl.

Chatine clucked her tongue. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Inspecteur.”

“What did you take from the kind monsieur?” Limier asked, his half-human, half-robot voice clicking on the hard consonants.

Chatine refreshed her smile. “Whatever do you mean, Inspecteur? I know better than to steal from the hand that feeds me.”

She nearly gagged on the words. But if they saved her from a one-way ticket to Bastille—the price you paid for stealing from an upper estate—then she could choke her way through them.

Chatine held her breath as the inspecteur’s circuitry flickered on his face. He was computing the information, analyzing her words, searching for hints of perjury. Over the past ten years of living in the Frets, Chatine had learned how to lie. But lying to a human being was one thing. Lying to a cyborg inspecteur, programmed to seek the truth, was quite another.

She waited, keeping her smile taut until the circuits stopped flashing.

“Will that be all, Inspecteur?” Chatine asked, smiling sweetly while pressing her hands against her tattered black pants. Her palms were starting to sweat, and she didn’t want his heat sensors to pick up on it.

Then, slowly, Chatine watched the inspecteur's gloved hand extend toward her. With a soft touch that chilled her to the bone, he pushed up her black hood to reveal more of her face. His electric orange eye blinked to life, scanning her features. It seemed to linger a beat too long on her high, feminine cheekbones.

Panic bloomed in her chest. *Can it see who I really am?*

Chatine hastily took a step back, out of the inspecteur's reach, and yanked her hood back down. "My maman is expecting me home," she said. "So, if you don't mind, I'll be going now."

"Of course," the inspecteur replied.

"Thank you, Inspecteur. Vive Laterre."

As Chatine turned to leave, she felt her entire body collapse with relief. She had done it. She had fooled his sensors. She was a better liar than even she had come to believe.

"I'll just need to check your pockets first."

Chatine froze. She quickly surveyed her surroundings. She spotted five Policier droids in her vicinity. More than usually roamed the Marsh, due to the annual Ascension ceremony today. The droids—or bashers, as they were referred to around here—stood at almost twice the size of an average man, and their slate-gray exoskeletons crunched and whirred as they walked.

Chatine wasn't afraid of them, though. She'd escaped Policier droids plenty of times. They were fast and stronger than ten men, but they still had their limitations. For instance, they couldn't climb.

Careful not to move her head, Chatine glanced up, thanking her lucky Sols that there was an old pipe running directly over her head. She refused to get flown off to Bastille. A neighbor was currently serving three years for stealing a measly sac of turnips. A First World relic lifted off a Second Estater? She'd be looking at ten years minimum. And hardly anyone lived that long on the moon.

She slowly spun back around to face Limier. "Of course, Inspecteur. I have nothing to hide."

Flashing another smile, Chatine stuffed her hand into her pocket and felt the medallion cool and smooth against her skin. The inspecteur once again reached a hand in her direction. Then, before he could react, Chatine hurled the apricot the monsieur had given her straight at the inspecteur's face. His circuitry sparked as his brain tried to make sense of the incoming object. Chatine bolted, scrambling onto a table full of fabric scraps before leaping toward the pipe.

For a second, she was flying, soaring above the inspecteur, the shoppers in the Marsh, and the Policier droids who were just starting to take notice of the disturbance. As she caught the pipe, she used her momentum to circle her legs around until she was straddling the rusty metal pole.

“Paralyze him!” Inspecteur Limier shouted to his droids, peering up at Chatine. His circuitry was going haywire, like someone had hacked the signal. “Now!”

The bashers maneuvered their bulky PermaSteel bodies around one another, assembling into attack formation. Chatine knew she had to move quickly. One rayonette pulse she could dodge, but five? That would be rough.

The pipe was too narrow to walk on, so Chatine shimmied across it on her stomach, weighing her options. The north exit was out of the question. It backed up to the Vallonay Policier Precinct, where she would certainly run into more droids. There was a catwalk about three mètres ahead of her. If she could reach it without getting shot, she could crawl the rest of the way to the east exit, back near Madame Dufour’s stall.

A split second later, she felt the heat of the first rayonette pulse whizz by the side of her face. She sucked in a sharp breath and shimmied faster. A second droid took aim below her, its shot perfectly aligned at her left knee. She braced herself for the impact. But just then, a group of drunk exploit workers stumbled through the fray, arguing about who among them had the most Ascension points

stored up. One of them crashed right into the droid, and the pulse barely missed her leg.

“Oh, excuse me, monsieur,” the drunk worker slurred to the droid, bowing ceremoniously. His friends broke out into hoots of laughter while Chatine took the opportunity to slide the rest of the way across the rusted pipe.

Thank the Sols for strong weed wine, she thought as she launched herself toward the catwalk. She caught the railing with both hands just as a third pulse was fired from below. This one glanced her left shoulder.

It wasn’t a direct hit, but it was enough. The pain was instant. Like someone had scraped her skin with a blazing-hot knife. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. The sound would only improve the droids’ aim.

Within seconds, her left arm started to lose sensation from the paralyzeur now pumping through her blood. She scrambled to swing her feet up over the ledge of the walkway but was unsuccessful. Now she was just dangling there, her feet paddling against the air.

The droids shoved people aside as they zeroed in on her location. More rayonette pulses tore past her, rippling and bending the air. It was only a matter of time before another one found its target.

Chatine knew she needed a distraction. She spotted a crate packed with chickens directly in front of her. She shook out her left arm, trying to chase away the numbness that was spreading toward her fingers, but it was no use. The paralyzeur was quickly working its way through her muscles.

Favoring her right hand, she gripped the railing as tightly as she could and pumped her legs until she’d built up enough momentum to reach the crate. She arched her body and kicked her legs out hard. The crate crashed to the ground and busted open. The chickens squawked and tried to fly away, but their useless wings barely allowed them to get off the ground.

The commotion was enough, though.

People were screaming, the stall owner was desperately trying to wrangle the loose birds, and the Policier droids fought to barrel through it all. But their efforts only managed to rile up the birds even more. They fluttered about, scraping people with their sharp claws.

The droids started firing with abandon. But with all the chaos below, their aim was poor. They hit more chickens than anything else. The birds absorbed the stun of the rayonettes and fell limp to the ground. They wouldn't be able to move again for a few hours.

With the droids distracted, Chatine was finally able to pull herself onto the catwalk and crawl, one-handed, across the rusty metal plank before shimmying down a support beam next to Madame Dufour's stall.

She glanced back to see the bashers still trying to push their way through the crowd to reach her. But with the number of people in the Marsh today and the riled-up chickens, it wasn't an easy task.

Madame Dufour glared at Chatine, her wrinkled arms folded across her chest. "Like father, like son," she said, making a *tsk* sound with her teeth. "Mark my words, boy, you'll be rotting on the moon before the end of this year."

Chatine flashed her a goading grin before swiping a loaf of chou bread from one of Madame Dufour's crates and darting toward the exit.

"Arrête!" The old woman's command sounded like a croak. "Get back here, you wretched croc!"

"Thanks for breakfast!" Chatine called back in a singsong voice.

And then, before the droids could track her or Madame Dufour could catch her, Chatine was gone.

Once she'd put a good distance between herself and the marketplace, she slowed to a walk and massaged her dead arm with the opposite hand. It wasn't the first time she'd been shot by a rayonette. And it probably wouldn't be the last. The sensation would return soon enough.

Chatine reached into her pocket and pulled out the pendant she had lifted from the Second Estater. She sucked off the sweet apricot juice and held the medallion in her open palm, studying it. For the first time, Chatine noticed the ornate golden Sol carved into the surface. It was unlike any of the three Sols that hung in the sky of the System Divine. This was a First World Sol. Its brilliant, fiery rays flared out to the edge of the medallion. Chatine reverently clasped the pendant around her neck, a rare genuine smile creeping across her face.

She hadn't seen the light of a Sol in nine years.

This was definitely a sign of good things to come.

- C H A P T E R 2 -

CHATINE

AS CHATINE WALKED THE MUSTY, COLD HALLWAY that led to her family's couchette, she was bombarded by the familiar sounds of the Frets: people fighting over scraps of food, children's footsteps scrambling across the grated metal floors as they played games of hide-and-seek and crocs-and-bashers, the sporadic cluck of a lost chicken that had wandered away from the Marsh.

She called this eighth-floor corridor of Fret 7 the "No Way Out hallway." Partially because every time she walked under its low, rusty ceiling, she was reminded of how trapped everyone was here. But mostly because of the various corroded signs on the wall that said, NO WAY OUT.

At least, that's what Chatine had convinced herself the signs said. The truth was, she had no idea. She couldn't read them. No one could. They were written in the Forgotten Word. A cryptic code of slanted sticks and swirling lines that had gradually vanished from the minds of Laterrians shortly after the settlers arrived from the First World.

Along with their hopes for a better life.

Chatine slowed, tucked a wayward strand of light brown hair back

under her hood, and pulled the loaf of chou bread she'd stolen from Madame Dufour out of her pocket. She tore it in half and immediately stuffed the second half into her boot so she wouldn't be tempted to eat it.

She supposed she could always tell her parents she'd had no luck in the Marsh today. But she knew if she wanted to keep her *other* score a secret—the First World medallion—she'd have to have something to distract them with. Her mother would never believe that Chatine would leave the Marsh empty-handed. Unless she had something to show for her morning, her mother would immediately grow suspicious. And if her mother was suspicious, then her father would start snooping. And nothing good ever came from Monsieur Renard's snooping.

She stared down at the paltry half loaf in her hand, her stomach growling at the mere sight of it. She took a single bite, forcing herself to go slowly, make it last, *chew*. But her hunger instantly took over. She swallowed the partially chewed lump, feeling the disgusting cauliflower dough pushing its way down her throat, and immediately lunged for another bite.

But before she could sink her teeth into the bread's tough exterior, she heard a piercing wail cut through the dark hallway. Chatine glanced up to see a woman seated on the floor outside one of the couchettes, trying unsuccessfully to coax a fussing baby to her breast. The baby squirmed and let out another shrill cry that tore through Chatine like a dull knife through stale, overcooked meat.

Would she *ever* be able to hear a baby cry and not feel like she was being ripped apart from the inside?

She attempted to block out the sound, but it was as if the harder she tried, the louder that baby screamed.

“Argh!” Chatine groaned. “Can’t you shut him up?”

She expected the woman to explode right back at her. That was just how things worked around here. Anger in the Frets bounced around like light in an endless corridor of mirrors.

But she didn't. The woman looked up at Chatine with dark, hopeless eyes, and she started to cry.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered, burying her face in the baby's tuft of black hair. "He won't eat because there's nothing left. The milk is all gone. My body's too hungry."

Shame warmed Chatine's cheeks. She turned her back on the woman and child, preparing to flee, to find another route to her couchette so she wouldn't have to walk past them. But her legs refused to move. It was as though the paralyzeur had somehow spread from her shoulder, all the way down her body, settling into her feet.

"My husband works in the potato ferme," the woman went on, sniffing, "and makes a good wage, but he's been injured. My tokens from the fabrique just aren't enough."

The remainder of the half loaf was heavy in Chatine's hand. She stared down at it.

Stolen.

Because she, too, was starving.

Because this woman was proof that even when you played by the rules, you still starved.

And the baby was still screaming.

With a frustrated growl, Chatine spun around and stalked toward the mother and child. She didn't stop as she approached them. She simply tossed the chou bread at the woman and kept going.

Chatine could hear the woman calling out to her. "Oh, merci! Merci, ma chérie! You are sent from the Sols!"

But Chatine didn't stop. In fact, she quickened her pace until she was running. The sounds of the baby's hungry wails followed her down the hall, chasing after her, reminding her far too much of the past she'd been trying to escape for twelve years.

Chatine didn't stop running until she reached the door of her family's couchette. She was breathing heavily, and her stomach growled again.

She couldn't believe what she had just done.

That bread would have been the most she'd had to eat in days. And she'd just given it away like she had food to spare. Like she had *anything* to spare.

Chatine shook out her left hand, her fingers just starting to tingle with sensation again. She reached toward the lock on the door of the couchette but froze when she heard the unmistakable sound of her mother's voice thundering through the wall, shaking the crumbling corridors and threatening to bring down what was left of the doors.

"Thirty-five percent?! You're out of your mind if you think I'm stupide enough to give that old croc more than a tenth!"

Fantastique, Chatine thought. *She's in one of her moods.*

From the sound of it, Chatine's father had just returned from his latest job and her parents were arguing over the cuts. They were always arguing over the cuts.

Chatine reached into her boot and pulled out the other half of the chou bread. She nibbled at the edges until they looked clean-cut and not torn. As the tiny morsels of bread touched her tongue, it took all of her willpower not to cram the entire thing into her mouth and pretend it never existed.

It wasn't until she bent over to return the loaf to her boot that she noticed the tear in the fabric of her black pants, right over her knee. She must have done it when she was crawling around on the catwalk, trying to escape the droids.

Chatine sighed. Her pants were already patched with so many metal wires, chain links, and whatever other random scraps she could find around the Frets, there wasn't much fabric left to patch.

She straightened up and listened at the door. Her mother's tirade seemed to have subsided. She waved her left arm in front of the lock.

"Access granted." The latch hissed and Chatine quietly pushed the door open and slipped inside.

Chatine imagined that the couchettes must have once been clean,

shiny staterooms with proper doors and running water and a stove that didn't sound like a sheep in labor. Before they turned into the decrepit slums they were now.

The Renards' couchette, however, was still one of the nicest in the Frets. Her father's position as the leader of the Délabré gang had awarded Chatine and her family some extra comforts, like their own kitchen, a location on a high floor, and two bedrooms instead of one. Most of the Third Estate didn't even have couchettes of their own. They slept in old cargo holds on the ground floor, tightly packed into shoddy bunks stacked all the way to the ceiling.

None of the couchettes had their own bathrooms. And only every other communal lavatory worked properly, making for a highly unpleasant smell that had become a constant fixture for life in the Frets.

When the Renards had first moved across the planet to Vallonay from their inn in Montfer, Chatine had spent her days outside in the semi-fresh air and her nights trying not to vomit from the stench. But since then, she'd grown accustomed to it.

It was amazing what conditions a person could get used to.

As suspected, when Chatine entered the couchette, she found her father sitting at the table in the living room, counting a large pile of shiny, Sol-shaped buttons. She remembered him talking about a job he was planning to pull at the garment fabrique. This was clearly the result. Chatine knew, based on their shape, that the buttons were supposed to go on the uniforms of Ministère officers. They were made of pure titan, which her father would undoubtedly melt down so he could use the precious silvery metal as currency.

Typically, only the First and Second Estates had access to titan. Members of the Third Estate were paid in digital tokens—or largs, as they were called around here—deposited into their profile accounts each week. That is, if you actually showed up for your assigned job, which Chatine and her parents never did.

Chatine's mother was standing over Monsieur Renard, monitoring the count.

"I can't believe that greedy woman wanted thirty-five percent for flashing a tette! I could have flashed a tette for thirty-five percent!"

"Trust me. Your old tettes aren't worth thirty-five percent," Monsieur Renard said under his breath.

But her mother heard it. And so did Chatine. She attempted to stifle a chuckle but was unsuccessful. Madame Renard jerked her head up, noticing Chatine for the first time since she'd walked in. Before Chatine could see what was coming, her mother reared her hand back and slapped Chatine hard across the face.

She stumbled from the blow, slamming against the couchette door.

"What the fric?" Chatine held her throbbing cheek. "He's the one who said it!"

"These old tettes have made more money around here than both of you combined!" Madame Renard was screeching now. She turned and glared hard at Chatine. "Because I know how to use what the Sols gave me to my advantage."

Chatine bit down hard on her lip.

It had been over two years since since she'd turned sixteen, and there wasn't a day that passed when her mother didn't less-than-subtly mention how many largs a healthy young girl such as Chatine could make in Vallonay. The blood bordels paid almost double for girls her age. Once you turned twenty-five, the price started dropping.

But Chatine preferred *her* methods. They were working. And as long as she continued to bring in more largs as a boy named Théo than she ever could as a girl named Chatine, she was able to convince her parents to keep up the charade that they'd given birth to a son eighteen years ago, instead of a daughter.

And Chatine would rather empty her veins into the Secana Sea than sell her blood to the First Estate.

"What did you bring me?" Madame Renard asked, dragging

her hard gray eyes up and down Chatine's black coat, searching for extra bulk.

Chatine pulled the half loaf of chou bread from her boot and tossed it at her mother. Madame Renard caught it deftly with one hand and started to examine it, running her dirty fingernails over the edge where Chatine had torn it in half.

"Where's the rest?" Madame Renard asked. "You better not be trying to steal from me too, you worthless clochard."

Chatine returned her mother's challenging stare with one of her own, refusing to show any fear. "It came that way," she stated evenly.

Her mother's eyes narrowed. She clearly didn't believe Chatine.

"I lifted it from Dufour's stall," Chatine went on. "You know that old croc can't be trusted."

This seemed to do the trick. Her mother let out a grunt and tossed the loaf onto the table. It crashed into the pile of titan buttons that Monsieur Renard was counting, causing them to scatter.

"Fric!" Monsieur Renard swore. "Now I have to start over."

"Good." Madame Renard spat out the word. "Maybe this time you'll magically find the missing hundred you still owe me from the last job." Then she reeled back on Chatine. "Guillaume told me new bodies were delivered to the morgue this morning. Cavs ripe for the picking. You better get your dirty face over there before their profile accounts are emptied."

Chatine shivered at the thought of going to the morgue again. She hated everything about that place. The ghostly quiet hallways. The smell of rotting flesh. But mostly, she hated the Cavs themselves. Those empty, unseeing eyes always seemed to be staring right into Chatine's soul.

She wanted to argue. She wanted to refuse to go, but she knew better than to disobey her mother. Her father may have been the leader of the most formidable gang in the Frets, but Madame Renard was definitely the master of the house.

Chatine clenched her fists tight and stalked into her bedroom, closing the door behind her and collapsing against it. She shut her eyes and took a moment to try to restore her angry, ragged breathing to normal.

Keep it together, she told herself. You're almost out of here.

She touched the small lump under the collar of her jacket—the gold Sol medallion—and could practically taste the freedom on her tongue.

It tasted *nothing* like chou bread.

“Hey,” a soft voice interrupted her thoughts, and Chatine opened her eyes to see her older sister, Azelle, lying on the bed they shared, staring at the small screen embedded in the inside of her left arm.

“Why aren’t you at work?” Chatine asked.

“Night shift,” Azelle replied without looking up.

Unlike Chatine, Azelle never missed a day of work at her Ministère-assigned job. She worked in the TéléSkin fabrique, processing the zyttrium metal that arrived by the shipload from Bastille and manufacturing it into new Skins to be implanted in the arms of the thousands of children born each year. When Azelle wasn’t dutifully logging hours at the fabrique, she could usually be found here, in the couchette.

Chatine was supposed to work in the fabriques too. The textile fabrique. At least that’s what her Skin told her. But she rarely listened to anything her Skin had to say. She was convinced the Ministère had those things rigged, which was why she’d rigged hers right back. She’d paid a pretty larg to have her Skin hacked so that her profile said Théo Renard and so that the Ministère could no longer track her whereabouts or send her reminders to check in at work each morning. But there were certain notifications—like Universal Alerts, curfew warnings, and the reminder for her monthly Vitamin D injection—that she simply couldn’t deactivate.

“Where you been?” Azelle asked.

“In the Marsh,” Chatine replied, opening a tin box next to their bed and riffling around until she found a stray piece of steel wire. She bent down and hastily threaded the metal through the fabric of her pants, stitching the tear back together. It wasn’t her finest patch-up job, but she couldn’t be bothered to care at this point.

“I was just AirLinking with Noemie down the hall,” Azelle said, her light gray eyes never leaving her arm. “She said there’s a woman in her fabrique who’s trying to organize a protest for more wages.”

Chatine snorted. She didn’t have time for murmurings of protests. They never worked. The last major rebellion was in 488, seventeen years earlier, instigated by the Vangarde, a group led by a woman who called herself Citizen Rousseau. Thousands of Third Estaters lost their lives for that woman, who was now locked away on Bastille. And for what? What did they have to show for it?

Nothing but a pile of ashes.

There were always rumors of unrest floating around the city of Vallonay. Hopeful fools trying to rally supporters, just as Citizen Rousseau had done back in 488.

“I don’t know why anyone would be stupide enough to protest,” Azelle said.

Chatine moved to the foot of their bed and popped up the metal floor grate, pulling out the wool sac that she kept hidden underneath. She wasn’t worried about Azelle noticing. The Ascension was starting in a few hours. The girl would be glued to her Skin for the rest of the morning.

“If you’re caught, you’ll be immediately flown off to Bastille and the Ministère will delete *all* your Ascension points,” Azelle went on. “I can’t think of anything more horrible than that!”

Chatine fought the urge to argue that she could think of punishments much worse than losing Ascension points. The last thing she needed right now was a fight with Azelle over the credibility of the all-powerful Ministère. Her sister lived and died by their laws and

broadcasts. In Azelle's eyes, the Second Estate—and the Ministère especially—were as powerful as Sols.

In Chatine's eyes, the Second Estate were nothing but gullible marks to steal from.

She reached into the sac and started transferring items to her pockets. As she did, she took a mental inventory of each object in her collection, making sure nothing had disappeared in the night. In a family of thieves and con artists, you could never be too safe with your secret possessions.

Some of the First World relics she knew the names and purposes of—like watch, pencil, and Sol-glasses. But for others, she'd had to resort to her own interpretations. Like the bound pile of papers with scribblings of the Forgotten Word on them. Or the thin black rectangle with the metal backing that Chatine thought looked like an external Skin.

Chatine stuffed the last of the items into her pockets. She put the empty sac back into the hole in the floor and replaced the grate. After patting down the pockets of her long black coat and making sure none of her clothing looked suspiciously bulky, she headed toward the door.

“Where are you going?” In her shock, Azelle actually looked up. “The Ascension is starting at 14.30! Don’t you want to watch it with me? What if they call your name?”

“They’re not going to call my name,” Chatine replied. If there was anything on this wretched, Sol-less planet she could be sure of, it was that they would *never* call her name.

“But they could!” Azelle said. “Everyone is equal in the eyes of the Ascension. Anyone can be chosen. That’s the beauty of it. Your luck could change just that fast. Honest work for an honest chance.”

Chatine’s sister was parroting the party line of the Ministère word for word. It was the reason Azelle checked in at the Skin fabrique two minutes early every day. The reason she worked until her hands

were raw and her feet grew blisters. Azelle was the only one in the family who played by the rules, because she was the only one who bought into the “honest work for an honest chance” philosophy that the Ministère tried to brainwash into everyone from birth. Chatine knew the truth, though. The only chances you got around here were the ones you took for yourself.

“I think I have a good shot this year,” Azelle continued, returning her attention to her Skin. “I’ve been checking in every day, watching all the Ministère broadcasts, and logging all my hours. I even put in overtime at the fabrique the last few months. I have almost twenty-five hundred points stored up.” Azelle gasped and gestured excitedly toward her arm. “Oh my Sols, look! They’re showing footage of Marcellus Bonnefaçon! I saw him in the Marsh the other day. He’s just as dreamy in person as he is on the Skin.”

Chatine glanced over at her sister’s arm and caught a glimpse at the familiar face of one of the Second Estate’s most famous members: the grandson of the powerful General Bonnefaçon, and an officer. The Ministère loved broadcasting Marcellus’s pretty face on the Skins whenever they got the chance. They’d been doing it ever since he came of age, turning him into a regular Laterre celebrity. He was almost as famous as the Patriarche and Matrone themselves.

In the clip, Marcellus was sporting that ridiculous shiny dark hair, flawless Second Estate skin, and gleaming smile.

Fric, Chatine thought. Does the boy clean his teeth with soap? Who has teeth that white?

Azelle jabbed at the screen, maxing out the volume of the implanted audio chip in her ear. “Oh,” she sighed at whatever Officer Bonnefaçon was saying in the clip. “He’s so charming!”

Chatine knew that all the girls in the Frets had a hopeless crush on Marcellus, including her sister. Another unobtainable thing for them to dream about. But Chatine honestly couldn’t understand why. He was one of the highest-ranking members of the Second Estate,

which automatically meant he was stuck-up, pretentious, and despicable.

“Did you know General Bonnefaçon is grooming Marcellus to be the next commandeur of the Ministère?” Azelle asked wistfully. “That’s what everyone in the Frets is saying. They think that’s why he’s been seen around the Marsh lately. He’s been training with Inspecteur Limier.”

Chatine shuddered at the memory of her earlier encounter with the creepy cyborg inspecteur.

“He’ll probably be there today for the Ascension. Are you going back to the Marsh? Maybe you’ll bump into him!” Azelle said with sudden excitement. “Wouldn’t that be amazing?”

“Yes,” Chatine replied. And she meant it. Marcellus Bonnefaçon was extremely wealthy. The thought of the things she could cop off that boy if she ever got the chance to *bump* into him made her head spin.

But she would not be returning to the Marsh today. Not if she could help it. With the Ascension happening, that place would be a mess and she wanted to stay as far away as possible. Even Azelle was smart enough to watch the ceremony from home.

Her sister sat up in bed, leaning her back against the wall and tucking her legs in while she kept her gaze trained on her Skin. “Oh Sols, please pick me this time. *Please* pick me.”

Chatine watched her with a mixture of pity and annoyance. If Azelle spent half as much time and energy conning as she did collecting points for the Ascension, their family would probably be rich by now.

Chatine checked the messy knot of hair at the back of her head, making sure it was properly hidden behind her hood. It wouldn’t be much longer now until she could sell it all to Madame Seezau. The croc paid well, and it was a nice side income for Chatine. She just hated this in-between phase, when her hair was long enough to

give her away as a girl, but not yet long enough to get the full two hundred largs.

Azelle sighed dramatically, cupping her chin in her hand as she watched more pre-Ascension footage on her Skin. “I mean, how fantastique would it be to live inside Ledôme? Where the Sols shine four hundred and eight days a year.”

“*Fake* Sols,” Chatine corrected.

But it was as though Azelle hadn’t even heard her. “There’s never any rain. And you get to live right next to the Grand Palais. I bet you’d even get to see the Patriarche and Matrone every once in a while. I like this one so much better than the last Patriarche. He was so serious and boring all the time. This one looks like he’d actually be fun to hang out with. And his Premier Enfant is so cute! Did you see the special they ran on her yesterday? She’s turning three next week and is finally speaking full sentences. She still can’t pronounce ‘Third Estate,’ though. She calls it the ‘Terd Estate.’ Isn’t that beyond adorable? I think she looks like the Matrone, but Noemie was saying yesterday that . . .”

Chatine rolled her eyes and left the room without bothering to hear the rest of the story. She knew it would probably be minutes before Azelle even realized she was gone.

Her parents were still arguing over the Ministère buttons on the table when Chatine re-emerged into the living room of the couchette. Her mother glanced up long enough to shoot Chatine a nasty glare and toss her the leveler.

“I’ll be checking it as soon as you get back,” her mother sneered. “So don’t even think of trying to steal from me.”

Chatine grimaced down at the device in her hands and felt a chill at the task that lay ahead of her. She told herself she’d just do it quickly. If she skipped it, her parents might grow suspicious and interfere with her plans. She’d just have to get it over with. Get in the morgue and get out. Then she could move on to her more pressing

errand of the day: a visit to the Capitaine. She couldn't wait to show him what she'd snagged in the Marsh today.

Chatine murmured something that resembled a good-bye, shuffled out of the couchette, and headed down the No Way Out hallway of Fret 7.

As soon as she was outside and alone, she patted her chest again, feeling the weight of the gold medallion hanging from her neck. Her heart raced at the thought of what it meant. What it represented.

It was her one-way ticket off this miserable planet.

It was literally her salvation.

Azelle was more than welcome to sit around all day waiting for the greedy pomps in the Second Estate to help her. But Chatine was much more inclined to help herself.

- C H A P T E R 3 -

MARCELLUS

“YOUR FATHER IS DEAD.”

Marcellus Bonnefaçon heard his grandfather’s words but could not seem to process them.

Dead?

Father?

It had been years since Julien Bonnefaçon had even been mentioned inside these walls. And now the sentence came so coolly from his grandfather’s lips, it was as if the death of Marcellus’s father was just some minor detail, barely worth mentioning.

Although Marcellus knew, after what his father had done, it probably *wasn’t* worth mentioning.

Marcellus kept his gaze straight ahead. His grandfather’s words might have turned his blood to ice, just for a second, but he knew better than to stop walking. He knew better than to *react*.

Instead, he made sure to keep his stride in sync with his grandfather’s. Orderly and methodical. Just as he’d been taught since childhood. They walked in silence down the long corridor of the Grand Palais’s south wing. Chandeliers with thousands of handcrafted

crystals dangled above them, and the polished marble floor beneath their feet winked and flashed in the morning Sol-light.

There were so many questions fighting for space in Marcellus's mind, but he shoved them back one by one. This was all part of his training. He knew that. Command your emotions. Stabilize your breath. Keep your mind clear at all times. If there were more details about his father's death worth giving, his grandfather would give them. But, as they entered the banquet hall, Marcellus couldn't help but steal a quick glimpse at his grandfather. Firmness lined his features, nothing to hint that the man's only son had died. Marcellus honestly wasn't sure why he'd expected otherwise. In the seventeen years that he had lived with his grandfather, he'd rarely ever seen a trace of grief on the man's face.

And his grandfather had known plenty of grief.

A moment later, the double doors on the opposite side of the banquet hall flung open and the Patriarche, dressed in his usual late-morning robes of dark silk, blustered into the room, followed by the Matrone, swathed in a purple satin gown, and their two-year-old daughter, Marie.

"Good morning, General," the Patriarche grumbled with barely a glance at Marcellus's grandfather.

"Good morning, Monsieur Patriarche," his grandfather replied evenly.

"Let's get this over with." The Patriarche sat down in one of the plush velvet chairs and immediately started to shovel food onto his plate. As always, the banquet table was overflowing with titan dishes piled high with smoked Novayan salmon, roasted quail, and duck pâté imported straight from planet Usonia. There were baskets of freshly baked brioche, a tray holding the finest sausages from planet Reichenstat, and every imaginable fruit, picked that morning from the hothouses that stretched across the flatlands below Ledôme.

Marcellus, at eighteen years old and still growing, could usually

eat his own body weight in food, especially during brunch.

But not today. Not now.

Instead, he just sat at the table and stared numbly at the brioche on the plate in front of him.

“Your father is dead.”

He couldn’t stop his grandfather’s words from cycling through his mind. Although he knew he should stop them. Immediately. They were dangerous words. Dangerous thoughts.

But his mind was a traitor.

Just like his father.

Marcellus finally picked up his brioche and spread blackberry jam over the top, fighting to keep his face neutral as he took a small bite and chewed. He knew this was a test. His grandfather would be analyzing how he handled this news. Every reaction, every seemingly innocent facial twitch—they all had meaning in the eyes of General Bonnefaçon. And rightly so. If Marcellus had any hope of being promoted to commandeur in the coming year, he couldn’t be seen as anything less than unwaveringly allegiant to the Regime.

“Production is up at the aerospace fabrique,” his grandfather was saying, his voice firm and his back straight. His gaze flitted from his TéléCom on the table to the Patriarche, to whom he was giving his weekly update.

Dead.

The word continued to flutter around in Marcellus’s brain like a flock of quails frightened by the sound of a shot from one of the Patriarche’s antique hunting guns.

Marcellus took another bite as he silently reminded himself to look focused. Interested. Like a commandeur would. Like he was sure Commandeur Vernay used to do.

“But production is down in the garment fabrique,” his grandfather continued.

The Patriarche stuffed a piece of salmon into his mouth, wiped his

lips with an embroidered napkin, and set down his fork. “And why is that, General? Is there a problem?”

“The foreman claims there’s been a shortage in supply of titan from planet Usonia, holding up the production of buttons for the Ministère uniforms—” General Bonnefaçon started to explain, but was interrupted.

“That’s unacceptable,” the Patriarche grunted. “The whole reason we helped Usonia win their independence from Albion was so our access to titan would no longer be hindered by that mad queen.”

Marcellus noticed a slight pulse in his grandfather’s jaw, just under one of his neatly trimmed sideburns. It was a rare chink in his usually impenetrable armor. But Marcellus knew the Usonian War of Independence was a sore spot for the general. The only reason Marcellus was sitting in this briefing instead of the more qualified Commandeur Vernay was because of that war.

But a moment later, his grandfather resumed his usual countenance: calm but firm, cool with a hint of a polite smile. Marcellus found himself adjusting his own face, wondering if he could ever achieve that look. A look that gave nothing away.

He dreamed of being able to give nothing away.

“Are you sure that’s not just an excuse?” the Patriarche asked, picking up his fork and digging into a pile of pâté. “Maybe the workers are just being lazy again.”

“Oh dear, mon cheri,” the Matrone said, pausing to take a sip from her flute of champagne. “You must not be so harsh on the poor workers. Perhaps they’re just tired. Or maybe they’re in need of a nice little treat from us, to boost their morale and let them know that we support them.” She blew at a ringlet of dark hair, which had escaped the tower of carefully entwined curls atop her head. “We must send them a crate of this beautiful gâteau.” She dug her spoon into the giant, three-layered, pink-and-green-frosted dessert in front of her and scooped out a large piece. “Don’t you think, Marcellus?”

Surprised to be spoken to, Marcellus almost choked on his mouthful of brioche. "Very good, Madame Matrone," he sputtered.

The Matrone leaned over and fed the spoonful of gâteau to Marie, the Premier Enfant, who was sitting on the chair next to her mother. The little girl's dark curls, held up with silk ribbons, glinted in the Sol-light streaming through the banquet hall's vast windows.

"Don't be ridiculous, *chérie*," the Patriarche admonished. "If you sent gâteau to one fabrique, you'd have to send gâteau to them all. Lest you want to start a riot. As my late father would say, 'That's just basic politics.'" He shared a conspiratorial look with Marcellus's grandfather. "This is why women should never run a planet, am I right, General?"

Marcellus saw the Matrone shoot a disdainful look at her husband before downing another gulp of her drink. Her brunch—and the majority of her meals, Marcellus speculated—seemed to consist mostly of champagne.

Oblivious of his wife's reaction, the Patriarche turned and cooed at his daughter. "Except my little darling, Marie, who is the cleverest girl on all of Laterre and who will be an excellent ruler one day." He blew a loud, wet kiss, which the child ignored.

Marcellus had been coming to these meals for only a few months, but already he dreaded them. Not just because he had to sit here watching the Patriarche shovel food into his mouth and the Matrone drink herself into a melancholy stupor, but because he never knew quite how to behave. How to sit. What to do with his hands. This room made him feel like a fidgety child forced to sit still in a scratchy uniform. As the future (but not yet) commandeur of the Ministère, Marcellus wasn't supposed to voice his opinion on matters. He was supposed to just sit there looking impervious and paying close attention so that, one day, he could contribute. But he always found his mind wandering. Today even more so than usual.

"Your father is dead."

“Oh, you little imp!” The Matrone’s voice brought Marcellus back to the banquet hall. The Premier Enfant was now standing on her chair, stamping her feet. “Now, why are you standing up there? You know Maman doesn’t like you climbing. We wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

The Matrone reached for her daughter, but the little girl jumped off her chair, grabbed two titan serving spoons from the table, and started to bang them together. The Matrone sighed a deep, loud sigh and drained the last of her champagne.

General Bonnefaçon cleared his throat and focused back on his screen. “The bread fabrique has also seen a dip in production, but it should be rectified when—”

“Oh, fabrique *this*, fabrique *that*,” the Matrone said, interrupting the general yet again. “All we seem to talk about these days are the fabriques. It is impossibly boring. Boring, boring, boring. And you”—she waved a finger at the general and then the table in front of him—“always poking and prodding at that silly TéléCom. I hate having these awful gadgets at my dining table. So disruptive. So hideous. So . . . *inferior*. Technology is for the weak minded. Those who cannot occupy their own thoughts turn to devices to do it for them.”

Marcellus gazed out one of the windows of the banquet hall. As the head of the Ministère and the Patriarche’s chief counsel, General Bonnefaçon, and his grandson, by extension, were awarded special privileges. Like their own dedicated south wing in the Grand Palais. Meanwhile, the rest of the Second Estate lived in smaller, less lavish manoirs throughout Ledôme.

Marcellus had grown up with this beautiful view of the Grand Palais gardens. But today, despite the artificial Sol-light streaming down from the TéléSky, the landscape seemed darker somehow.

“Ma chérie,” the Patriarche was now saying. “Leave the poor general alone. He needs the TéléCom to deliver his reports, that’s all. You know he wouldn’t bring his ugly tech into the banquet hall if he didn’t have to.”

“Madame Matrone,” Marcellus’s grandfather said in a low, gentle tone. “I must inform you that due to these delays at the fabrique there may not be enough sweet breads for the Premier Enfant’s third birthday fête next week.”

Suddenly, it was as if a black cloud from outside Ledôme had drifted into the Palais and across the Matrone’s face. Her dark eyes narrowed, her brows dipped, and her nostrils flared. “What on Laterre do you mean?” She didn’t wait for a reply. She shook her head fiercely, knocking her curl tower askew. “This must not be tolerated. You get out there right now, General, and you tell those lazy workers that—”

“Now, now, ma chérie. Don’t work yourself into a tizzy. You’ll get wrinkles. You wouldn’t want to undo the effects of those youth injections, would you?” The Patriarche patted his wife’s hand. “There *will* be enough sweet breads for the birthday fête. General Bonnefaçon will see to it personally.”

Hearing the word “birthday,” the Premier Enfant began to beat her spoons together again. “Bur-day, bur-day, bur-day!” she shrieked.

The Matrone raised the back of her hand to her forehead and said in a strong whisper, “Please, ma petite. Be quiet now.”

But the little girl was already too excited to stop. She raised the spoons above her head and clapped them together again and again, stomping in time with the beat.

“Nadette!” the Matrone and Patriarche shouted at the exact same moment.

A few seconds later, Marie’s governess came bustling into the banquet hall carrying a plate of sliced fruit. Her face was flushed and her auburn hair was unkempt.

“I’m sorry, Madame Matrone. I was fetching the mademoiselle a peach from the kitchen. She’s been asking for one all morn—”

But the servant’s words were cut short when the Matrone raised a hand and waved toward her daughter, her numerous titan rings clattering with the gesture. Nadette fell silent, bowed, and

immediately started toward the child in an attempt to quiet her.

Marie, however, evidently thought it was a game. She let out a squeal and began to run around the banquet hall, all the while still banging her spoons.

“Oh, my head,” the Matrone said, looking like she might faint. “This is too much, too early in the day.”

“Here.” The Patriarche passed his wife his own flute of champagne. “Have some more sparkles.” He then turned to the general. “Have you checked with the gamekeeper yet about the hunt this afternoon? I want to make sure the gardens are fully stocked with game. Last time I went out, there was barely so much as a squawk to be heard.”

Marcellus let out a long breath and allowed his mind to wander, just for a few seconds.

“Your father is dead.”

“How did he die?”

“Did he suffer?”

“Monsieur Patriarche,” his grandfather replied. His tone was cool, patient. “Perhaps if the quail population is dwindling, you’d be best to hold off hunting until more can be bred in the menageries. Your father always limited his hunting to—”

The Patriarche sat bolt upright in his chair. “Hold off?!” He spat out the words, as if it was the most ludicrous suggestion his chief counsel had ever made. “On a hunt? What on Laterre do you presume I do all day? Sit around polishing my guns?”

His anger seemed to rile up the child even more. She dropped her spoons and started chanting, “Bang! Bang! Bang!” as she formed guns with her chubby fists and fired them into the air.

“Nadette!” the Matrone cried. “Please. My aching head! Can’t you do something?”

Nadette, looking terrified, finally caught the girl and tried to shush her by stroking her hair and feeding her pieces of fruit.

“No!” Marie pushed her governess’s hand away and started to cry. She appeared to be thinking about running again, but just then, Marcellus caught her gaze and cocked an eyebrow. Without a word, he pulled a fresh napkin onto his lap.

The Premier Enfant saw his signal, sniffled, and rubbed her teary face. She dropped to her knees and crawled under the table toward Marcellus. When Marcellus felt the silk of her gown brush against his legs, he started folding the napkin.

One fold, two folds, three, and four.

He’d done it so many times, he didn’t have to look anymore. The swan’s neck, wings, and beak soon materialized in his hands. It took only a minute to complete. When he was done, he felt Marie’s fingers on his. She took the napkin-bird and crawled away. Even though the Patriarche was still chattering about his upcoming hunt, Marcellus could hear the girl cooing to her swan under the table.

“Finally, Nadette,” the Matrone said. “It took you long enough to quiet her.” She turned to Marcellus. “You would think, given it’s her *only* job, she’d be better at it.”

Suddenly there was a loud *bang*, and everyone startled and looked over at the Patriarche, who had just pounded his fist on the table, causing the Matrone’s champagne flute to tip over.

“This simply will not do!” He banged his fist again as a servant came in to mop up the spilled drink. “Dwindling quail population?” He snorted. “What nonsense! If you won’t speak to the gamekeeper, General, I might just have to find a general who will.”

Marcellus tensed at the comment. He hated when the Patriarche threatened his grandfather. General Bonnefaçon had devoted his life to the Regime. He was the most loyal servant of Laterre that Marcellus had ever known. His grandfather had been practically running this planet for the past thirty years. The former Patriarche, Claude Paresse, had promoted Bonnefaçon to general when he first inherited the Regime. He’d passed away only two years ago, and

now his son, Lyon, the current Patriarche, would be positively lost without Marcellus's grandfather. And yet he acted like the general was as replaceable as a faulty droid.

Marcellus opened his mouth to say something—even though he had no idea what *to* say—but the general silenced him with a subtle shake of his head.

"I will speak to the gamekeeper this afternoon," the general said cordially.

"Forget it," the Patriarche spat. "I'll speak to him myself. Apparently if you want anything done right around this place, you have to do it yourself." And with that, he rose from his chair and stalked out of the room, promptly ending the meal.

General Bonnefaçon rose too, which was Marcellus's cue to wipe his mouth and push back his chair.

"Please excuse us, Madame Matrone," the general said. "Officer Bonnefaçon and I have much to do to prepare for today's Ascension ceremony."

The Matrone slouched in her seat. "Oh, not another dreadful Ascension! If you keep letting Third Estaters into Ledôme, we'll be positively overrun."

"I assure you there is plenty of room in Ledôme," General Bonnefaçon said. "And the Ascension manoirs are a long way from the Palais."

The Matrone waved a dismissive wave, sending her rings clacking together once again. Then she stood up, teetering somewhat on her feet. "Come, Marie. Come walk with Maman in the gardens."

Marie let out a wail and burst into tears. "No! Birdy! Birdy!"

The governess immediately ducked under the table and scooped the child up into her arms, cooing into her ear. "Yes, yes. We're going to see the birdies right now in the gardens."

"If my husband hasn't shot them all," the Matrone said under her breath.

“No!” The little girl’s voice was almost muffled by sobs now.
“Birdy! Birdy!”

Nadette attempted to shush the child again as she followed the Matrone out of the banquet hall. Marcellus’s gaze fell to the floor next to the edge of the tablecloth, and he noticed his white swan lying abandoned under a chair.

For some reason, he felt a strong urge to pick it up and run after the little girl, but then he saw that his grandfather was already halfway out the opposite door. Marcellus turned and followed behind him, grateful that the meal was finally over and he wouldn’t be expected to sit through another one for an entire week.

As Marcellus and his grandfather walked back to the south wing, Marcellus’s mind filled with more questions about his dead father that he longed to ask.

What were his last words?

Was he all alone?

But he knew there was no way he could ask such things. Curiosity could easily be misconstrued as concern, and concern could just as easily be misconstrued as grief.

And you don’t grieve traitors.

So he continued down the corridor in silence, following the general into his large, oak-paneled study. The walls were covered with First World paintings and relics, including the head of an antlered beast (never successfully bred on Laterre), which hung above the fireplace with its dead eyes watching over the room. Marcellus’s grandfather took a seat behind his vast, imposing desk and immediately began to watch the many AirLink messages that had appeared on his TéléCom since they’d left for brunch.

“Will that be all?” Marcellus asked.

He knew he’d be expected in the Marsh soon for the Ascension, but he secretly longed for a few moments alone before then, so he could process the news about his father in private.

“No, actually,” his grandfather replied, still staring at his TéléCom. “Your father’s body is in the morgue at the Vallonay Med Center. They’ve requested that you go to sign off on the disposal.”

A wave of nausea instantly passed over Marcellus. “Me?”

His grandfather looked up from his screen, a knowing smile dancing on his lips. “First time seeing a dead body?”

Marcellus knew his grandfather was teasing him, the way everyone at the Ministère liked to tease him. He had a reputation for having a weak stomach—something he was working hard to overcome. He straightened up, reprimanding himself for losing control. “Yes. But I’m fine. Obviously, I have no connection to my father. His body will be like any other . . . body.”

He swallowed down the bile rising in his throat. He needed to stop saying “body.”

His grandfather set down his TéléCom and flashed Marcellus a sympathetic look. “It’s perfectly normal to feel uneasy. I remember my first. Sols, I damn near fainted.”

Marcellus perked up. “You did?”

His grandfather chuckled at the memory. “Yes. I was working in the Policier, and my inspecteur had sent me to Montfer to investigate the murder of an exploit foreman. It was dreadful. The man had been ripped open with a mining pick. His insides were spilled out all over the ground. I took one look at him and I swear every planet in the System realigned.”

Marcellus felt himself grow woozy at the image and quickly sat down across the desk from his grandfather. “What did you do?”

His grandfather leaned forward conspiratorially, as if sharing a long-kept secret. “I clenched my teeth so hard to keep from passing out, my back molar cracked right down to the gum. Spent the rest of the day in the Med Center. Told them it was a piece of overcooked sheep bacon I’d bitten down on at lunch.”

Marcellus let out a laugh, instantly feeling lighter.

“But it gets easier,” his grandfather went on. “Eventually you see enough dead people that they stop being people and start being . . . bodies.”

A memory from earlier this year—almost three months ago—suddenly drifted into Marcellus’s mind. He could still see his grandfather’s vacant eyes as he’d returned from claiming the remains of the twelve men and women who’d come back from their mission to assassinate the Albion queen. The rebels on Usonia had eventually won the war, but that particular mission had failed.

He knew those soldiers were not just bodies to his grandfather.

One in particular.

“But, Grand-père,” Marcellus began with a shaky breath. “What about when it’s someone you know? Maybe even someone you’re close to?”

The general’s eyes narrowed, and Marcellus knew he was treading on uneven ground. But he pressed forward anyway. His grandfather had to talk about what had happened at some point. Didn’t he?

Marcellus tried to wet his lips, but his tongue was as dry as sand. “Not my father, obviously. I barely even remember him. But when you saw the body of Commandeur Vernay . . .”

Marcellus saw the shift in his grandfather’s expression immediately. Like a curtain being drawn.

“It’s already after 13.30,” his grandfather said, picking up his TéléCom again and swiping at the screen. “You should get on your way to the morgue. I’ll message Inspecteur Limier and let him know you’ll be late for your Ascension duties in the marketplace.”

Marcellus searched his grandfather’s eyes for a hint of the levity and openness he’d glimpsed just moments ago. But it was gone. Stamped out. Like a planet passing in front of a Sol.

Since childhood, Marcellus had trained himself on the complex workings of his grandfather’s worn and weathered face. Like an explorer mapping out rugged, uncharted terrain, he’d memorized every

winkle, every muscle, every subtle movement and what it meant. He'd learned to recognize the rare moments when his grandfather was open and exposed, and more importantly, the all-too-frequent moments when his grandfather was closed. Locked. Bolted.

And right now, the bolt was as heavy and unrelenting as PermaSteel. He should never have mentioned her name.

"Of course, sir," Marcellus said, rising from his chair. "I'll go now, on my way to the Marsh." He swallowed as he walked to the door, glancing back long enough to say, "And I'm sorry."

The general's head whipped up and his gaze landed on Marcellus. It was cold and dark. "For what?"

But Marcellus didn't answer. He just left.

- C H A P T E R 4 -

CHATINE

“ONE THOUSAND EIGHT HUNDRED THIRTY-TWO Ascension points. Fourteen tokens.”

The computerized voice of the leveler echoed off the decrepit walls of the Vallonay Med Center morgue as Chatine scanned the Skin of the first body. It was a woman, possibly late thirties, probably a fabrique worker. She had clearly died of rot, from the looks of her blackened stump of a leg. Rot was the most common cause of death in the Frets. Médicaments were in such short supply in Vallonay that even the smallest cuts or nicks could eventually fester and turn black. And once the rot invaded your bloodstream, there was really no hope.

The leveler emitted a beep, alerting Chatine that the points and tokens had been successfully lifted from the woman’s profile account, and she moved on, ducking under the gurney to avoid the motion sensors that activated the morgue security microcams. Chatine had performed this morbid task enough times to know exactly where they were stationed. All thirty-seven of them.

Holding her breath as she passed by what was left of the poor woman’s leg, Chatine glanced up at the rows and rows of cabs that

stretched out before her—all of them waiting to be frozen and ground to dust. This was going to take forever. There were so many bodies, some had been placed two to a gurney. Chatine spotted a man who was missing all ten of his toes and knew right away that it was the work of the Délabré, her father's gang. This was someone who clearly hadn't paid his debts. All the bodies were in varying states of decay—rotting flesh, sores around the mouth, sunken eyes—even though Chatine knew they'd only been dead less than a day.

Ascension points and tokens were normally emptied from accounts within thirty hours of death—the time it usually took for the Ministère to register the death and for the profile to be wiped from the Communiqué. Chatine's father had discovered years ago that those points and largs could be lifted beforehand and “redistributed” to the highest bidder, and so the unpleasant task of retrieving them had fallen to Chatine.

She just really wished the Med Center workers would close the eyes before bringing the cavs in here. This job would be so much easier if the dead weren't staring back at her, begging her to save them.

Chatine moved on to the next corpse—a younger woman, a *girl*—and placed the leveler flush against the inside of her arm, directly over her darkened Skin. The device rapidly flashed as it analyzed the data.

“Fifty-two Ascension points, four hundred twelve tokens.”

Chatine blinked at the amount and studied the girl, careful to avoid her open, unseeing eyes. She was thin—like almost everyone in the Third Estate—but her feet and ankles were puffy and swollen, as though all the fat on her body had drained downward. Her arms and legs were covered in bluish-purple splotches, and rough scales enveloped her neck as though attempting to strangle her.

Chatine pressed her lips together to keep from being sick. She recognized the symptoms. She'd seen the same ones on the girls standing outside the blood bordels.

The girl on the gurney had low Ascension points, which probably

meant that, like Chatine, she had ignored her job assignment and vowed to make her own way in the world. She'd chosen to defy the Ministère's "honest work for an honest chance" propaganda. But instead of stealing and pulling cons like Chatine, she'd decided to sell the nutrients in her blood. Chatine could understand the reasoning behind the decision. Extra largs meant extra food. Extra food meant you and your family could live to see another day. Unfortunately, however, most girls—like this one—took it too far. Sold too much to the blood bordels. Got addicted to the feel of all those extra tokens in their profile account.

Dishonest work for a dishonest death.

Chatine felt a shiver ripple through her, and she glanced away from the girl's young face. Mercifully, the leveler beeped just then, and she moved on to the next cav.

Chatine ran a hand down the side of her coat, feeling the weight of her stolen trinkets lining her pockets. That was all she needed to assure herself that she would never end up like that girl, lying in this run-down building while vultures stole her precious largs.

The next cav was a man, much older than the previous two corpses. The skin around his eyes had wrinkled and sagged years ago. His long dark hair and beard were streaked with silver. And his fingertips were blackened and calloused. An exploit worker perhaps? Someone who had spent practically his entire life underground, mining precious metals and minerals to send to the fabriques for processing?

His clothing was tattered and caked with a fine dust. Chatine had to pull up the sleeve of his shirt in order to access his Skin. She hated when she had to actually touch the bodies.

She placed the leveler against the Skin and waited, turning her face to the wall so she wouldn't have to look at him. The leveler seemed to be taking an unusually long time, and Chatine glanced back to make sure it was making proper contact with his Skin. Then it let out a series of soft, rapid beeps.

“Error message. Zero points. Zero token.”

Chatine jumped back, nearly dropping the leveler. She told herself not to look. She urged herself to just keep going, move on, finish this job and be done with it, but she couldn’t help it. Her gaze was pulled back toward the man.

Toward the *prisoner*.

He had to be. Only those arrested and sent to the moon had their accounts completely emptied. And it was only now that she took note of the color of his ripped and tattered clothes. Bastille blue. This man had died on the moon. He’d died a convict.

But what was he doing *here*?

Plenty of prisoners died on the moon, which was why it had its own Med Center and morgue. The bodies were normally disposed of there. Everyone knew life sentences were short on Bastille. Living conditions were even worse there than they were in the Frets.

Keeping close to the edge of the gurney, she skirted around to the man’s other side.

Don’t do it, she told herself, but her hands seemed to move on their own. She had to see it with her own eyes. She had to know for sure.

Chatine slowly peeled back the man’s other sleeve, sucking in a sharp breath when the neat row of metallic silver bumps came into view.

His prisoner tattoo.

A lifelong brand. Even those who did their time, who survived the harsh conditions of Bastille, were forever marked.

Chatine suddenly felt a longing to touch the markings. To feel the raised surface under her fingertips. To imagine what it must feel like to have those metallic bumps seared into your flesh. Was it similar to having the Skin implanted? But of course, Chatine couldn’t remember that. Just like everyone else in the Third Estate, she’d been a small child when the médecins had implanted the Skin into her left arm and the connected audio chip into her ear.

With shaking hands, she slowly reached out. Her fingertip had

barely brushed the surface of the first bump when she heard the doors of the morgue hiss open and footsteps echo down the corridor.

Chatine glanced around the crowded morgue, searching for a place to hide. But there was nothing. No curtains, no closets, no supply cabinets. And anywhere she tried to go would certainly trigger the microcams.

The footsteps grew louder.

Chatine's pulse raced. If she was caught in here stealing from the dead, she'd most certainly end up with a prisoner tattoo of her own.

She had only one option.

She hopped onto the neighboring gurney, scooted the blood-bordel girl aside, and lay down next to her, hiding the leveler inside the sleeve of her coat. Her skin crawled and bile rose in her throat as she felt the girl's cold, scaly flesh brush up against the back of her hand. She kept her eyes open, staring at the ceiling as she held her body perfectly still, trying to emulate the frozen expression of terror that was on all these faces.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two men enter the morgue. One was dressed in green scrubs. A *médecin*, judging from the cyborg circuitry implanted in his face. The other was wearing a crisp, bright white military uniform with silvery titan buttons, marking him an officer of the *Ministère*.

What is a member of the Second Estate doing in a Third Estate morgue?

“My records state that he died of frostbite,” the *médecin* stated with an emptiness in his voice that mirrored the eyes of the cavs. “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be,” the second man replied flatly. “This loss is a gift to *Laterre*.”

Chatine fought to keep the surprise from her face. *Who is he talking about?*

She held her breath as the two men walked down the row of gurneys, stopping at the one just next to Chatine. The prisoner.

“Were you close to your father?” the *médecin* asked.

“No,” the other man replied, and Chatine thought his voice sounded vaguely familiar. “I never even knew him.”

His father? Chatine thought. This man—this officer—has a father who was in prison? She didn’t think Second Estaters were even sent to Bastille. They were hardly ever convicted of crimes. She was desperate to turn her head, flick her gaze to the side for just a moment. She wanted so badly to find out who this officer was.

“I’ll leave you alone with him,” the *médecin* said, and then Chatine heard the clacking of footsteps receding back down the hallway.

The man in uniform walked around the gurney, standing between Chatine and the prisoner. Chatine saw the twinkle of something shiny on his finger. A ring. Definitely valuable. Maybe even titan. She contemplated leaping up from the gurney now and using the element of surprise to swipe the ring and run. But she worried about the aftermath. The motion-sensor microcams had most definitely been activated as soon as this man entered the morgue. She simply couldn’t risk getting caught. Not when she was this close to freedom.

The man stood motionless next to the body, staring down at it. She could see his hands curl into fists, as though he were angry about something. Then, a moment later, his hands relaxed and Chatine heard him speak.

“Why did you do it?”

There was something soft and fragile in his voice. Broken, even. Chatine was almost certain he was speaking *to* the dead prisoner. But before she could begin to fathom why, out of the corner of her vision, she saw the man touch the fabric of the prisoner’s sleeve. The one Chatine had peeled back to reveal his prisoner tattoo.

“What is this?” he asked, and it wasn’t until right then, seeing the shirt from this awkward angle, that Chatine noticed what had evidently caught the man’s eye.

There was something stitched into the inside of the prisoner's shirt.

Could that be what I think it is? Chatine wondered.

The man quickly grabbed something from a nearby tray and started to cut away at the convict's shirt.

Chatine flicked her eyes to the side, trying to take in as much information as she could in a single glance, but it wasn't enough. She still couldn't make out what was stitched into the fabric.

Careful not to make the gurney creak, Chatine slowly turned her head a millimètre to the right, letting her gaze fall upon the man gripping the tattered shirt in his hands. She had to fight back the gasp that sprang up in her throat.

She recognized him.

How could she not?

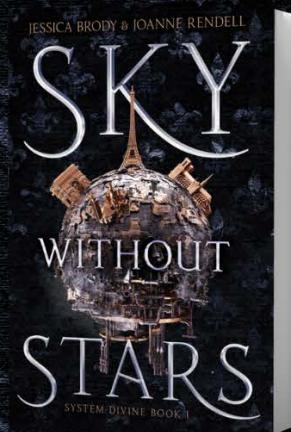
Nearly everyone on Laterre would recognize him. That shiny dark hair with just a hint of a curl; those sharp, handsome features; that tall, slender build. In her shock, Chatine must have completely forgotten about the leveler shoved into the sleeve of her coat, because suddenly she heard a loud crash as the device slipped off the gurney and fell to the floor.

We hope you enjoyed this exclusive excerpt from *Sky Without Stars* by Jessica Brody and Joanne Rendell, book one of the System Divine Series.

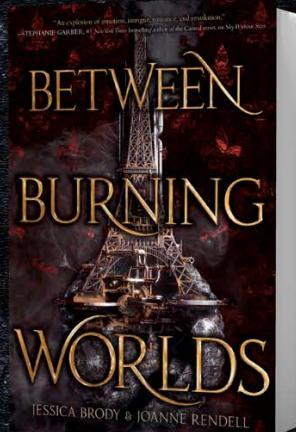
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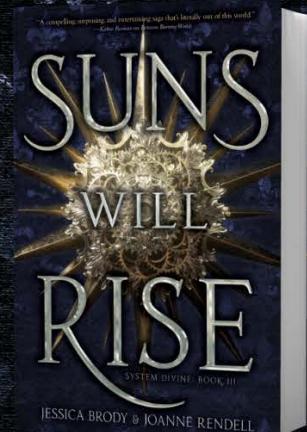
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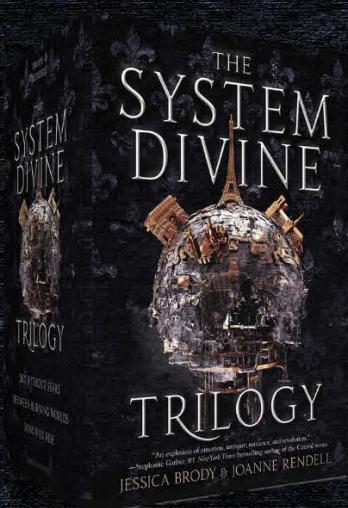
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